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ABSTRACT

In an effort to demonstrate the influence of reading, a reading and skills improvement instructor asked college students what book made the greatest difference in their lives and what that difference was. The instructor polled 120 students and listed 20 of those responses and their emotional reactions. Book titles ranged from "The Bible" and "A Tale of Two Cities" to "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." (MS)

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Books that made the difference: What college students told me

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Books that made the difference: What college students told me

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In 1983 Gordon and Patricia Sabine published a book entitled, ***Books That Made the Difference.*** Sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the Sabines travelled the United States encouraging people to respond to two questions: What book made the greatest difference in your life? What was that difference? The 200 responses cited in the book demonstrate the tremendous impact of reading on lives, not only academically, but also emotionally, socially, and physically.

The book also influenced my life as a college professor. Working quarterly with over 100 students in a public 4-year university, I have realized that not only learners' cognitive domains, but also their effective domains must be developed. Therefore, I decided to poll students enrolled in my reading and study skills improvement course regarding the Sabines' questions. By requesting students to respond to the questions, they searched their memories for books that fostered positive feelings, attitudes that caused them to approach the reading situation. The polling strategy reinforced reading for creation, reading to satisfy a curiosity to learn, or reading for self-improvement.

I polled 120 students during Spring Quarter, 1986. The range of students included 74 freshmen, 24 sophomores, 12 juniors, 6 seniors, and 4 graduate students. I used the following survey:

BOOKS THAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE

Name .....

Street .....

City, State, Zip .....

Major .....

Year in College .....

Occupation .....

Please answer the following two questions:

1. What book made the greatest difference in your life?

   Author's Name (if known):

2. What was that difference?

To say the least, I was both inspired and impressed with the reactions. Out of 120 responses, sixteen students reported "none"; however, the remaining 104 responses demonstrated changes as reading affected their lives. Modifying the reporting format in Sabines' book, I selected twenty students' responses that demonstrated the power of the printed word.

Titles of the Books They Named

Title	Author
A Tale of Two Cities	Charles Dickens
As a Man Thinketh	James Allen
Bible	
Dancing in the Light	Shirley MacLaine
Dictionary	
Highlighters	William B. McCloskey, Jr.
In This Sign	Joanne Greenberg
Inside Out	E. Stuart Bates
Jonathan Livingston Seagull	Richard Bach
Of Mice and Men	John Steinbeck
Out on a Limb	Shirley MacLaine
Passages	Gail Sheehy
Roots	Alex Haley
See You at the Top	Zig Ziglar
Stranger in a Strange Land	Robert A. Heinlein
The Catcher in the Rye	J. D. Salinger
The Hobbit	J. R. R. Tolkien
Tracks	Robin Davidson
Where the Red Fern Grows: The Story of Two Dogs and a Boy	Wilson Rawls
Your Child's Self-esteem	Dorothy Corkille Briggs

Their Responses

Andy Bock, Freshman, Business Administration. **The Hobbit**, J. R. R. Tolkien. It was the very first book that I read and I liked it so much that I started to read more books that were similar. **The Hobbit** helped develop my reading.

Brian Bromley, Freshman, Accounting. **As a Man Thinketh**, James Allen. I am still in the process of reading the book, but it has given me a more positive outlook on my actions. I used to lack confidence in myself, and still do a little, but this book is helping me beat this problem. The author said, "Only you can control your destiny." So, I am putting that message to use for me.

Dean Brookins, Sophomore, Secondary Education. **Where the Red Fern Grows: The Story of Two Dogs and a Boy**, William Rawls.The difference was my "love" for animals. I used to hate having pets because once, I had a dog and I loved him. He died and I vowed to never get another one. After reading the book, and maybe shedding a few tears, I got another dog and now I can love him as I loved my last dog. (dumb story, Huh?)

Terry Bruckbauer, Junior, Computer Science. **A Tale of Two Cities**, Charles Dickens. This was the first time I can remember my mind being used to go to a "different world"; the first time reading really sparked my imagination. The book allowed me to unlock the dream world in my mind.

Andrea Campbell, Freshman, General. **Roots**, Alex Haley. The book showed how black people were treated by whites. My parents were prejudiced. So, I figure I should be, too. After reading that book, I became more knowledgeable to what the black people experienced. Because of that book, I am no longer prejudiced.

Juliet Devitt, Sophomore, Changing Majors. Interesting question because many books have had great impact on my life at different times. So, probably the book that has made the greatest difference is a dictionary, preferably one

that provides word origins. My poor, battered, old, bought-second-hand-15-years-ago **Random House Collegiate Dictionary** has provided me with the excitement of exploration, precision of thought and word use, history (word origins), and much more.

Paul Guillemette, Freshman, Art. **Out on a Limb** and **Dancing in the Light,** Shirley MacLaine. Through a personal account of Shirley MacLaine's own struggle for self awareness and spiritual awareness, which are one in the same, these books made me realize a way to be happier or more content with who and what I am or want to be. It is difficult to explain, but these books touched something deep inside me. Hopefully, I am on a better path to ... who knows?

Barrie Huff, Graduate, Secondary Teaching/English. **Inside Out,** E. Stuart Bates. I have in the past taught writing as an exercise to test students' abilities. Not having taught for 15 years, I was still locked into mechanics. A recent composition class has opened my eyes not only to teaching writing, but also to enjoying it. Prior to reading that book, I felt I couldn't write. How, then, could I be an effective teacher? I don't think, in retrospect, that I was, at least not by my current standard. A by-product is that my own writing has improved considerably. This book clarified for me the process of writing and changed my outlook and attitude.

Peter Keenan, Senior, Liberal Arts. Bible. Please don't get the impression that I am a born-again Christian or any other form of religious fanatic, I rarely go to church. After twelve years of parochial schools, the Bible was thoroughly instilled in my brain. But after five years of not considering the Bible or religion, I was required to read it for class. After reading for myself, I realized how much that book influenced my behavior and my attitudes towards others. It helped me to be a better person.

Laurie Kopack, Sophomore, Business Education. **Of Mice and Men,** John Steinbeck. No difference, really, it's just that no matter how many times I read the book, I **always** cry. The story is just so sad! I guess it shows me that somethings in life have to turn out crummy, no matter what. Reading this book always sets me back into a deep contemplation for about three days.

Donna Newman, Sophomore, Business Administration, **Passages,** Gail Sheehy. The difference that **Passages** made on my life was to help me understand my own growing process more clearly. I was in my early twenties when I first read the book and I was very confused about my feelings and needs. **Passages** helped to clarify those feelings and aided me in realizing that many of my needs were perfectly normal. Even today, I refer to **Passages** to help prepare myself for future years and for the comfort in knowing my insecurities are not abnormal.

Terri Ohman, Freshman, Biology. **Bible**. This book changed every part of my life! The book gave me peace, direction, purpose, happiness, comfort, compassion . . . but most of all, hope. No other book could give me as much as this book has.

Jaimie Parent, Freshman, General Studies, **Jonathan Livingston Seagull,** Richard Bach. The book helped me see that I could do anything I desired, if I only believed in myself. It taught me that you never quit learning and if there is a hereafter, we learn then, too. It helped me get some of my priorities straight and helped me set new goals. After my first quarter in college, I needed to do just that. I needed a boost and the book gave me one.

Sasha Perrin, Freshman, General Studies. **The Catcher in the Rye,** J. D. Salinger. I had a journalism teacher in high school who, after almost a year of frustration in dealing with my underachieving personality, handed me the

book and said in a short, fed-up voice, "Read it. It's about you." The teacher was right and the book was great. The book didn't change me visibly (as Hogan's did in improving my golf game) but it awakened me to some intangibles that have aided me in growing so that I can still be a rebel, but a rebel that vents rebellion in a productive form in hopes of making a better world that the one I came into. Afterthought. The teacher was still frustrated because I spent all my time reading the book instead of doing homework.

Kammie Phillips, Sophomore, Business Administration. **See You At The Top**, Zig Ziglar. I had been depressed and very down on life, in general. My dad noticed and he gave me a copy of this book. See You At The Top changed my attitude about life and people around me. Now I have a better feeling about what I do personally and what other people do around me. I am happier with everything.

Tammy Shearer, Freshman, Elementary Education. **Your Child's Self-esteem**, Dorothy Corkille Briggs. This book changed the way I view people in society, my goals in life, and gave me a sense of purpose. I chose elementary Education as my career goal because I now believe that one's self-esteem is critical to a successful, happy life in our society. I also feel that teachers, in addition to teaching the fundamental skills, have a tremendous effect on a child's self concept and, thus, possibly improve a child's opportunity for greater learning and a happier life.

Lucy Stilson, Senior, Pre-nursing. **Stranger in a Strange Land**, Robert A. Heinlein. I read this book in junior high or high school, and I think the thing that made the difference was the **intelligence**, honesty, and good looks of the main character (he was half Martian). Ever since, I have been turned-on to more of Heinlein's books, all of which I have enjoyed and have been enlightened. (I refer to **Stranger in a Strange Land** as my bible.)

Cynthia Strom, Freshman, General Studies. **Tracks**, Robyn Davidson. This book helped me realize that there are other people who have had the same kind of problems that I have had in reaching goals. So, the book made a difference in my attitude.

Jana Suchy, Graduate, Journalism. **Highlighters**, William B. McCloskey, Jr. During my first summer in Homer, Alaska, I read this book about the Kodiak fisheries. It was quite comprehensive in that it used fictional characters and story line but wove in the history of many events, i.e., the 1964 Great Good Friday Alaskan Earthquake, as well as the biology of the fishermen's catch (a chapter took the reader down to the ocean floor to learn the habits and life cycle of the king crab, where up above the characters were floating and dropping crab pots overboard).

As a cheechako (first time, first year in Alaska), fishing was all new to me. I based my early knowledge and awareness of this important Alaskan industry on this book alone. I was thoroughly intrigued and enthralled, unless those are one and the same, and you can throw "fascinated" in there, too.

While I didn't actually seek out an active role in the fishing industry for perhaps another year and a half, I had a distinct impression and understanding of the fishing fleets while living in several southeastern communities. Finally, I made the big step, leaving behind a frustrating pursuit of white collardom in public radio to pound the docks in Sitka looking to crew on and actually flesh out the words and chapters of the book.

My life has not been the same since, nor will it ever be. What started as a one-trip or perhaps one-season adventure evolved into a three year total absorption and "love affair" with the fishing lifestyles and livelihood. I have adopted Sitka as my hometown.

Now, of course, I'm in school again, but not to forsake the rewarding life I've found in Sitka's fishing fleet. I have already begun to blend my aspirations for freelancing and fishing into a reality; I expect this "difference" to be with me a long time. Note: Highliner is the coveted term used to refer to the fishermen or boats that bring in the largest catch; they have highlined the fleet.

Jacklynn Thiel, Junior, Communication Sciences and Disorders. ***In this Sign***, Joanne Greenberg. Since reading is such a big part of my life, it is hard to distinguish which book affected me the most. One is In This Sign. I read this book when I was a freshman in college and had not yet chosen my major. This book helped me to decide. I had known I wanted to do something in the helping professions, but I had never considered this specific area. Choosing my major course of study helped me to set a goal for my life.

Discussion

For the purposes of the article, I trimmed the 104 student responses to twenty. Indeed, the task was difficult as the books cited were interesting—mainly, but not always, "good" titles. In addition, the comments about the differences the books had made frequently outshone the books themselves.

The intent of the survey was to demonstrate the tremendous influence of reading. The questions clearly evoked meaningful, emotional responses from a majority of the college students. However, the results of the survey also raised the following questions: Do certain books have a bearing on our way of thinking? Should the cited books be required reading for high school and/or college students? Should educators ask the two questions of their students? Should recreational reading be included in curriculum designs?

How about you? What book made the greatest difference in your life? What was the difference?

References

Sabine, Gordon, and Patricia Sabine. **Books that made the difference.** Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1983.